



Call for Papers

Representations and Re-presentations of Sex Work

Volume 1 of the book series “Studien zu Sexarbeit
und Prostitution | Studies on Sex Work and
Prostitution”

Sex work is a socio-political field marked by polarisation. Public debates, academic discourses and political regulations are often shaped by emotive ascriptions, moral judgements and simplified claims to representation that obscure the diverse lived and working realities of sex workers — whether through feminist controversies, media scandalisation or aesthetic stylisation. Such representations manifest themselves in social orders and moral imaginaries, regulations and laws, as well as in discourses, narratives, visual figurations and associations in the media, politics, academia and artistic production. They are accompanied by latent curiosity, strong emotions and forms of moral politics. The resulting stigmatisation, criminalisation, discrimination and stereotypical homogenisation — both visual and discursive — continue to shape the lived realities of many sex workers today. These relations of oppression — particularly along the lines of class, race, gender, sexuality or the body (Martini 2025; Künkel 2007; Probst 2022; Thiemann 2020) — are produced and reproduced in and through politics, academia, the media and everyday life, including by sex workers themselves.

Alongside these dominant forms of representation, a variety of other, no less powerful, portrayals and imaginaries of sex work and prostitution exist. Emerging from different professional perspectives, some of these complement one another while others contradict each other. This diversity arises because sex work is addressed by different institutions that produce distinct problem definitions corresponding to their respective mandates (Dressler 2014; Löffler 2022; Brink/Löffler/Keller 2024). Public health offices, for example, approach sex work through different concerns than the police; counselling services ask different questions than tax offices. In this way, the image of sex work becomes differentiated, giving rise to specific interpretations, political demands and representations, which nevertheless remain intertwined with society's moral imaginaries.

In contrast, empirical research aims to produce verifiable statements about realities — not through the search for absolute truths, but through a continuous process of approximation. At the same time, academic engagement with sex work and prostitution demonstrates how easily research questions can reproduce discursive presuppositions or become co-opted by institutional purposes. Although research on sex work has become more accessible and more nuanced, it is still conducted more often about

sex workers rather than with them (Martini 2025). Moreover, participatory and collaborative approaches do not necessarily ensure that sex workers will be recognised as knowledge producers about their occupational group, nor that they can intervene in the prevailing regime of representation (Faissner et al. 2024; Hammes 2022; Tocci 2024; Platt et al. 2018; Yang et al. 2025). Furthermore, despite increasing engagement with representations, positionalities, power structures, knowledge systems and knowledge production, theories and methods often remain shaped by Eurocentric assumptions, thereby perpetuating asymmetrical subject-object relations.

The field of sex work, through the actors operating within it, is also a site of resistance and utopian imagination. Utopias emerge against the background of intolerable experiences and articulate desirable alternatives. They are essential for motivating efforts towards change. In this process, reflection becomes deliberate counter-reflection. Regardless of where the boundary between radicalism and feasibility is drawn, paying attention to utopias reveals that alternatives are being imagined in many places — both on a small scale (Wright 2010) and on a larger one (Mannheim 1985). Thus, utopias arise not only from secure social positions or from claims to speak for others, but also as expressions of self-empowerment.

In differentiated societies, representation is a multifaceted event because it takes place simultaneously on various levels, though with differing degrees of access to power resources and correspondingly varying opportunities for influence (Schwinn 2001): within and outside institutions, for or against them. As a practice, representation entails both depiction and advocacy. It therefore includes both speaking about others and speaking for them, in both linguistic and visual form (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2004). Representation is always based on a definition that selects, includes and excludes (Goffman 1974). In doing so, it seeks persuasive force through values, academic knowledge or everyday plausibility (Spector/Kitsuse 1977), and through embedding in discourses (Keller 2005). Beyond this, representation can be understood as translation: it creates intelligibility, yet in the process may also simplify differences and homogenise (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2004). Representation across power differentials is therefore tied to responsibility for the narratives it sustains. The success of translations, however, also depends on whether those being translated fit into them or — where



they are able to — resist them (Latour 2003). In this respect, representation is also bound up with critique (Foucault 1977). To analyse representation, then, is not merely to examine its content; from a critical perspective, it raises the following questions: Who interprets? Who claims interpretive authority? Who is represented, and who is not — for what reasons, by whom, and how? On what occasion, in relation to what precedes it, with what strategies and with what attitude and positionality (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2004)? And what happens in response?

Against this background, this interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary edited volume invites contributions that examine the representation of sex workers and sex work from historical, contemporary, and utopian perspectives. Possible contributions may be developed in relation to the following questions, which are explicitly not intended to be exhaustive:

- Who speaks, how, and with what consequences, for themselves or for sex workers? How, and by whom, are acts of representation by sex workers made visible or invisible?
- Whose voices are heard, whose are excluded — and why?
- Who has been able, or is able, to intervene in the existing regime of representation, how, and with what consequences?
- How can the different perspectives of actors in the field of sex work, as well as media, artistic, political or institutional engagements with the field, be combined, bridged or mutually translated into one another?
- How have institutional perspectives on and representations of sex work developed? How did, and how do, they change?
- How can empirical research address normative questions and the positionality of researchers?
- What possibilities exist for participatory and collaborative research with sex workers? What does “participatory” and “collaborative” research mean in this field?
- How can approaches informed by critiques of representation and knowledge, as well as non-Eurocentric and decolonial theoretical and methodological frameworks, be productively used in sex work research?

- What might innovative forms of knowledge production and representation look like, for instance beyond text or beyond a single language?

- In view of the highly polarised representations of sex work, how can public processes of evaluation and decision-making be organised in such a way that well-considered regulations can be developed?

- How do regulations, spatial location, media representations, research and technological or digital developments, among other factors, change the possibilities for self-representation and/or political agency? What alternatives to dominant representations, and to the consequences associated with them for sex workers, already exist, and how might they be further developed or rewoven?

We welcome academic analyses, methodological reflections, as well as activist, essayistic, artistic, art-based, and multimodal (beyond-text) formats. Contributions by sex workers, activists and researchers occupying multiple roles are especially welcome.

Interested contributors are invited to submit proposals in the form of an abstract of 300 to 500 words, together with a short biographical note, by **15 July 2026** via email to Arne Dressler (arne.dressler@uni-hamburg.de), Marlen Löffler (marlen-simone.loeffler@iu.org), Sabrina Stranzl (stranzl@ifk.ac.at) or Lisa Waegerle (Lisa.Waegerle@hs-bochum.de).

Responses will be sent by the end of August 2026. In the event of a positive response, the deadline for completed contributions of 20,000–35,000 characters including spaces will be the end of February 2027. The edited volume will be published by Springer Verlag in the series “Studien zu Sexarbeit und Prostitution | Studies on Sex Work and Prostitution”. Academic contributions will undergo a double-blind peer-review process. Arts-based research, artistic, essayistic, activist and multimodal contributions will undergo a separate, format-sensitive review process conducted by the editors, drawing on expertise from artistic and practice-based fields.



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